UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

THE OLD WOMAN:

One Phase of the Character Poem in Contemporary British Verse

SISTER MARIA KOSTKA, S.S.J.

A THESIS

IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PHILADELPHIA
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LEIDEN

FOREWORD

Grateful acknowledgment is here made to the members of my Order who directly or indirectly encouraged this work to completion; to the Professors in the English Department of the University of Pennsylvania with whom the writer was associated; in particular to Dr. Frank Alan Laurie for the suggestion that ultimately led to this study, and to Dr. Cornelius Weygandt under whom the study was made.

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Yet in my chambered mind the while, I see
Within an attic in a swarming, high,
And cliff-like tenement that blocks the sky,
One knitting and one stitching at a hem,
Two patient women uncomplainingly
Talking of all that life has done to them.

—*Life: Wilfred Gibson.*

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At the outset, this piece of research dealt with poetry presenting all manner of people. The array was vast, lively, interesting. Young and old and middle-aged appeared in turn upon the stage and spoke their part, or appeared upon the canvas and revealed their part. In the throng were:

Men of the fields,
Men of the seas,
Wanderers of the roads;
Pipers, fiddlers,
Toilers of the city,
Soldiers and Great Lovers;
Sleepers, bathers, dancers,
Poets, saints;
Shropshire and Irish lads and lasses,
The King of China's Daughter,
The Shepherdess;
Old men, elderly gentlemen—
Old women, elderly ladies—
Dear, delightful, wicked, sad;
Exiles, misers, peddlers blind and seeing;
Micky-the-Moon and the Brewer's Man;
Grocers at their song, even
A Mathematical Master and His Dullest Pupil!

The Old Women outnumbered all. Fitting survival. Study of them grew fascinating. They have about them an air of fulfillment. Life and they have come to grips and they bear away its scars not without pain, yet not always with resentment. One old lady who had been "a none-too-happy wife", who has lived to see her children grow away from her, still can say:

To be used by life,
Even ill-used and broken utterly,
With every faith betrayed and trust abused,
Is a kinder lot than in security
To crumble coldly to the grave unused.[1]

To lives so brave, consideration is less than due.

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[1] Katharine Weir: "Collected Poems 1905–1925." Wilfrid Gibson, London, Macmillan and Co. 1929.

I

The Sitwell poetry, obscure as Browning's at times, gives several clear portraits of old women. Edith Sitwell, particularly, seems to enjoy watching people as they move "'gainst the silk pavilions of the sea".[2] Somewhat pitilessly she portrays those whose impersonality of living is but

> A little reading by sad candlelight
> Of some unknown, uncared-for book.

Narrowing the type down to the individual, she presents old Mademoiselle Richarde,[3] a poor, vague creature who

> lived and rattled in the emptiness
> Of other people's splendours.

Old Mademoiselle had that habit, not so rare, of using words and phrases and declaring opinions garnered from some respectable source—even Madame la Duchesse—opinions on the most trivial things. So, she succeeded in making pallid talk that fell from her lips

> meaningless half words by cold airs blown
> Through keyholes.

Across her feeble gesture toward living, flashes the bold stroke of Madame la Duchesse, "old and gold-japanned", whose vivid presence scatters hither and yon "the small grey leaves" of lives that are but a succession of small futilities.

Quite different is the old lady whom we hear lamenting her lost youth as the year is at the spring.[4] Delicious odors from fruit

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[2] Fireworks: Clowns' Houses. Edith Sitwell.
[3] Troy Park III. Mademoiselle Richarde.
[4] An Old Woman Laments in the Spring-time. Edith Sitwell, "Collected Poems." London, Duckworth, 1930.

and spice trees seep into her brain and draw her from lament to threnody as she recalls her lovely maidenhood. Wrinkled face, flapping hat, and trailing coat are momentarily forgotten as she conjures up the swift beauty that was hers, the shining fairness "lovely as the snows". The word *forlorn* once checked a mood of exaltation in the poet Keats; similarly, as the old woman chances upon the word *Death*—once a "far-off" thing —her ecstasy trails out into brooding silence.

In Giardino Pubblico,[5] Osbert Sitwell describes one of the *grandes dames* of a vanishing era. The Old Marchesa is a Duchess of Wrexe[6] type who imposes her will

> Upon all things both live and still.

To conceive her at once both a whale and a rainbow required ingenuity, but the combination is achieved without disaster. One senses cumbrous hugeness as the old lady swims along the main drive of the Public Gardens in the grand estate of a "borrowed carriage". The slanting rays of the setting sun "hit out each tone" of her tinkling jet (once the proper adornment of elderly ladies) and she glows and expands in iridescent hues. All smaller, gentler beings that do not have the sense or the power to flee the "gigantic glory" of her presence stagnate into pale little shadows that dare to warm to life again only when she and her equipage go "sunward through western glade". Daily the old Marchesa goes riding by, and daily, at sunset hour, the world receives its castigation and reprieve.

In a kind of fairy fantasy, Marjorie Holmes[7] gives us an old woman who recalls her youth as a time of dreams,—dreams, she believes, such as none other could ever know. Now, "old

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[5] Five Portraits and a Group. III. Giardino Pubblico: Out of the Flame. Osbert Sitwell. London, Grant Richards, 1923.

[6] The Duchess of Wrexe: Hugh Walpole.

[7] The Old Woman. "Modern British Lyrics." Ed. Stanton A. Coblentz. New York, Minton, Balch & Co., 1925.

and sleepy-eyed", she can still thrill to that glowing time when, she says,

> The stars have kissed my face, the dews my feet.

In the happiness of this memory, she falls adream again. On a "rising wind" come the fairies. They dance on the grass and sing to her of "a place apart", calling her there

> Where cold white water gleams beneath pale skies,
> And mystic fir trees stand upon the hill. . . .

She goes with them. One thinks of Maire Bruin[8] lured from her betrothed to the Land of Heart's Desire, and the Voice that sang outside her door:

> The wind blows out of the gates of day,
> The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
> And the lonely of heart is withered away
> While the fairies dance in a place apart,
> Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
> Tossing their milk-white arms in the air;
> For they hear the wind laugh and murmur and sing
> Of a land where even the old are fair.

The extreme loneliness of old women whose only home is hotel life is pictured by Iris Tree[9] in a poem beginning:

> Old woman forever sitting
> Alone in the large hotel, under the fan . . . .

The fashionable world spins round her. She, no longer a part of it, sits alone, "infinitely alone", the grey of age upon her head, its wrinkles in her cheeks. An emotional fury seems to seize the writer as she ponders on the scene, tragic only because of its supreme loneliness:

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[8] William B. Yeats: "Poetical Works," Vol. 2. New York and London The Macmillan Company, 1907.
[9] "Poems." London, John Lane, 1919.

> What crime was yours, old woman,
> What sin against the Earth
> That she should give you now
> A cap of dust and furrows in your cheek,
> And at the end
> A hole dug in the mould?

The harsh question ignores the inexorable law of life that demands the ultimate sacrifice of all but soul-life: "Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."[10]

The symbolism of an autumn sky at evening is used with good art to express the emotional reaction of an elderly woman to an unlooked-for evening of delight.[11] Sunset rose, clouds "steeped in gold", silver ecstasy of moon-drenched sky are symbols of the joy that flashed across her autumn time, leaving her with a memory that will remain undimmed even

> When all things fade and fuse and merge
> At edge of death's abyss.

The poem breathes like a sigh tremulous with emotion from all but forgotten deeps.

Akin to this poem in nature imagery are the four lines in which Monk Gibbon portrays a woman's life cycle:[12]

> Spring was within the child's face, a cool freshness,
> Afterwards summer, that most lovely thing;
> Autumn at last, mellow and very patient,
> A lined beauty almost as beautiful as spring.

The tender green of her spring-time lies in "cool freshness"; "summer" is the warmth and beauty of her radiant womanhood;

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[10] St. John: xii: 24, 25.
[11] "An Evening of Delight." Lesley Grey in *The Saturday Review* (London) reprinted in *Literary Digest*, December 6, 1930.
[12] A Woman: "For Daws to Peck At." New York, Dodd, Mead and Company.

in the last two lines she is as the autumn leaf before November rains have loosed it to the winds.

The imagery here may be thought dainty, even trite. But it is pleasant to come upon this first tribute to the beauty peculiar to age. One likes to think it not merely a chivalrous gesture.

Against the glamour of this pastel—and in inverse order—are Wilfrid Gibson's terse and realistic lines striking off deep moments in woman's life:[13]

> The dim-eyed crone with nodding head—
> He's dead, and I'll, too, soon be dead.
>
> The grave-eyed mother gaunt with need—
> Another little mouth to feed!
>
> The black-eyed girl with eyes alight—
> I'll wear the yellow beads tonight.

A Canadian poet[14] takes us to the New England coast in a poem delicately entitled Sea Lavender. She is recalling her Puritan grandmother,

> Austere but kind . . .
> Smooth-banded hair and smoothly banded mind.

Or such the old lady had seemed to a younger generation. But a woman grown thoughtful is stirred to deeper insight by a few bits of seaweed, pressed and mounted. She recalls a "tiny, black-clothed figure" accustomed to wander alone "by the ocean's passionate blue", seeking shells and weeds—purple, amber, green. It comes to her now that this

> Searching salt-sea pools
> For Beauty's shadow

implied a lovely human quality that she adores to know persisted under all the wrappings of Puritan austerity.

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[13] The Old Nail Shop: "Collected Poems 1905–1925." London, Macmillan & Company, 1929.

[14] Louise Morey Bowman. "Canadian Poets." Ed. by John W. Garvin. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1926.

A Canada of sharp contrasts is shown by Katharine Hale in An Old Lady.[15] Madame de Courament is of the

> elderly, elaborate folk
> . . . like a passing pageantry,
> Gorgeous and of another day.

Riding home in her luxuriant car, she chats to the young woman beside her as they motor the snowy roads from Rideau Hall to Chateau Laurier. The two had been partners at Bridge that evening. Madame, we understand, has a clever hand,

> Coloured with age and wrinkled,
> But beautiful and tapering, too,
> Quite in accord with this old stately room
> With crystal chandeliers
> And flowers and the warm tapestry of books . . .

Silent the cards fall. Against the stillness breaks "a far frost-sharpened sound". Madame loses a trick. It is this she is explaining to her young companion:

> . . . "I saw you noticed that dog's bark.
> It sounded almost like a wolf's;
> It took me back to the Red River days.
> Oh, it was fifty years ago, my dear;
> I was as young as you. . . . It seems like yesterday.
> Hardships! I loved it all!
> Even the wolves, baying far out of sight,
> Failed to disturb our rest
> When we were safe at home.
> The Indians were quite friendly—
> And the eternal glamour of the snow!
> And yet tonight, just when I heard that sound,
> Sharpened by frost,
> I felt an old pain strike me,
> The knife-like thrust, before a child is born.

---

[15] "Canadian Poets." Ed. by John W. Garvin. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1926.

I was alone that night.
. . . . . .
My Indian maid had let her family in
Looking for whiskey.
. . . . . .
For hours the Indians danced and sang and yelled.

I watched them from my icy-cold bedroom
Through great cracks in the floor.
. . . . . .
And all night long I heard the wolves;
They kept a sort of savage company
With my own stifled cries.
Tonight, my mind went back a moment strangely—
I always thought he had the sweetest face
Of any of my seven . . . But then he was the first!"

She raised her glittering hand
And found the speaking tube, to modify her
chauffeur's pace.
"And that, my dear, was fifty years ago," she said.
"The prairie was a very different place—
I never thought, then, I should come to Bridge!"

II

Sturdily "Oul' Kate"[1] rubbed and scrubbed for "nigh sixty years". Her first good rest came upon the day when she lay in a deal coffin. For all her brisk activity, Kate belonged to the "decent, quiet" kind and the gates of Heaven opened wide to admit her. But the bright immensities dazzled her unaccustomed eyes and she begged a moment's grace,

> "For till this from Sandy Row, Belfast,
> I can tell ye's a tar'ble change.
> . . . . . .
> "I'm moithered wi' all the blaze o' sun,
> I never seen so much gold,
> It's a clane upset at my time o' life,
> An' me that stupid and old.
>
> "An' what do yez fin' to do day-long?"

Kate is nonplussed when the angels tell her

> Of worship, of service, of raptured thought,
> And of heaven minstrelry.
>
> "I never had time on earth," said Kate,
> "To think o' them sort o' things,
> Could I play on a harp wi' fingers like these
> That's too crooked to grip the strings?"

After a while's musing she says:

> "Would ye take it ill, if I asked
> Is there any laundries here?"

No ordinary angel could answer that, so Kate is conducted to the Archangel Gabriel. Gabriel looks at the shrinking guest while she tells her story,

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[1] Oul' Kate in Heaven: "Selected Poems." Richard Rowley. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1931.

> And kind, kind were the eyes of him,
> And soft, soft was the smile.

At the end Kate pleads to be given that to do which she knows how:

> "I wouldn't give no trouble at all
> If ye'd get me my washin'-tub,
> And hide me away in a corner o' Heaven
> An' give me some clo'es to scrub."

To grant that wish requires a trip to earth, but angel wings are fleet and sooner than you'd think

> Kate beheld her washin'-tub
> Set in a quiet place.

But to launder robes stainless as "clouds moonlit at night" is "wastin' water and suds". So Kate orders up some good Belfast clay—red and blue—and the baby angels learn to make mud pies. Kate has real work then and she does it singing away to the one tune she knows, a tune picked up from the Protestant Boys.

> "Every one till to his trade," said Kate,
> "The golden harps for you,
> But I'll sing the song that I used to sing
> An' scrub as I used to do."

It seems ever the way of Age to wait upon Youth. Perhaps, too, there is ever a bit of the resentment this old mother reveals in her song:[2]

> I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow,
> Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;
> And then I must scrub and bake and sweep

---

[2] The Song of the Old Mother: William B. Yeats. "Poetical Works," Vol. 1. London, Macmillan and Company, 1906.

while

> the young lie long and dream in their bed
> Of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head.

The symbolism of Yeats appears in the last complaining line:

> While I must work because I am old,
> And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold.

Though Winifred Letts' love of all that is human is evident throughout her poetry, she is particularly sympathetic in her rendering of Irish character. Old women she hits off to the life, whether they come from soft Wexford or harsh Mayo, whether they pray in convent or tramp the roads. This study presents five such portraits, three within the present group.

An Old Mayo Woman[3] stands barefoot in her patched garments,

> The bog . . . about her, the dark hills behind,

a symbol of the bleak west country of Ireland. But the picture is not wholly bleak. The old woman carries with her the fruit of her labour—"turf for the hearth". She is dreaming as she goes homeward,

> her face to the sun,
> Dreaming how she'd rest herself, the day's work done.

The poet sees in her a higher, different symbolism. The old woman brings to her mind the thought of

> Our Lady of Labor, the Mother of God.

The Old Wexford woman[4] is in a humor known to most

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[3] "More Songs from Leinster." Winifred Letts. London, John Murray, 1926.

[4] "Songs from Leinster." Winifred Lets. London, John Murray, 1913.

people after they reach a certain (or is it an uncertain?) age. Times and people—younger people—are so vastly different. The way the young ones do outrageous things is a constant irritant to the older folk who, through the mist of the years, at any rate, appear models of perfection. An old crony might have put the question to which the Wexford woman makes answer:

> What do I think of the race that we're rarin'?
> They're not worth my shawl.

And the reason? All they think about is new clothes, and making themselves pretty, and roaming about for pleasure. Strange, new habits for women to acquire! Now in her day—and she tells no lie—

> The black fasts were kept without hesitation.
> . . . . . .
> Arrah! now there's no manner of strength in
> the nation,
> It's sorra a one but needs dispensation
> For fear they should die.

Her mind eased by its spill of resentment, she winds up in the usual way, superiority complex in good form:

> Mine was the days—but there's no good comparin'.
> God help us all.

The Breaking Point[5] is the moment of high relief to patient old Ellen, neighbor all her life to sorrow and hardship. We see her trudging the streets,

> Poor stunted Ellen in her beaded cape
> That once was velvet; rusty, draggled crape
> Around the hat that crowned her grizzled head,
> And broken, widespread boots upon her feet;
> But "that's the lovely night," was all she said,
> Although the north wind brought the stinging rain.

[5] "More Songs from Leinster." Winifred Letts: London, John Murray, 1926.

Sickness, misfortune, death,—waited upon her children. Her husband—"a porter shark" they called him in the town—added to her care. Through all the years she went steadfastly providing for them

> Until the day when Fortune for surprise
> Gave gold for cargo where there had been dross.
> Ellen was dazzled by the radiant guise
> Of Death who came to her while yet she slept.

Without these family cares, yet lonely in their absence is one of Padraic Colum's old women.[6] It is a wistful view he gives through her little cottage pane:

> She sits by the fire
> Who has reared so many men.

The chickens gather round her and "make talk and complain". The old woman talks, too, her voice cluttering "low like the chickens":

> "The sons that come back do be restless,
> They search for the thing to say;
> Then they take thought like the swallows,
> And the morrow brings them away.
>
> In the old, old days, upon Innish,
> The fields were lucky and bright,
> And if you lay down you'd be covered
> By the grass of one soft night."

Thus she and the chickens together

> make talk and complain,
> While the little moths are creeping
> Across the cottage pane.

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[6] Interior: "Modern British Poetry." Ed. by Louis Untermeyer, New York, 1930.

More desperately lonely still is The Old Wife[7] seen by Wilfrid Gibson. The clutter of chickens means life at least and some need to be cared for. But terribly alone

> Beside the chilly hearth the old wife sits
> With nodding head.

The rain drips through the rotten thatch, the door latch rattles in the "squalling winds". The old woman dreams, and in her dream a loved hand lifts the latch, and the cold, dark room grows snug and warm and bright.

Very briefly, Salvage[8] tells the tragedy that a "grey old country wife" outlives:

> New-widowed and bereft
> Of her five sons,

she stands before the blazing ruin of her home, dazedly hugging to her naked breast two things pitifully salvaged from the double wreckage of her life, each in its way a symbol:

> A toy gun and a copper coffee pot.

A Toronto poet[9] selects two incidents from the life of a Chippewa woman who lived on a lonely island in the far north. Selfishness and courage beyond imagining dominate both. In the first, love is the goad bringing the incident within human comprehension. In the second, the quiet resignation of Age to Youth's callous betrayal numbs with its pain. The incidents are two generations apart. The time duration is the same and there are other points of similarity.

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[7] "The Golden Room and Other Poems." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.
[8] "Collected Poems 1905–1925." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1929.
[9] The Forsaken: Duncan C. Scott "The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse." Toronto, Oxford University Press.

I

A Chippewa woman, hungry, freezing—a baby clutching at her breast—crouched by a lake.

> Behind her the round
> Of a lonely island
> Roared like a fire
> With the voice of the storm
> In the deeps of the cedars.

With a "twisted bark of cedar" for a line, she fished all the wild day through the ice on the lake, "fished and caught nothing". But love was a fire in her heart. At nightfall

> Valiant and still unshaken,
> She took of her own flesh,
> Baited the fish-hook

and cast it again through the ice flakes hissing along the water. The human bait lured two trout. Laden with these, she faced the long journey of two days back to the fort. Through a land "wolf-haunted and lonely", she went unafraid,

> Sure of her goal
> And the life of her dear one.
> .....
> Then she had rest.

II

The Indian woman grown old and withered. The baby son who had clung to her breast, passing into age. His children, lusty and strong, hunting abroad through far lands. One day, on their northern tour, they stopped at the island. They camped for a single night beside the old people. With morning light they rose in the ruthless vigor of youth and hastily gathered together their belongings, warm rabbit-skin robes aplenty and mink-traps. Craftily they

> Launched their canoes and slunk away through
> the islands,
> Left her alone forever,
> Without a word of farewell.

Silent and unprotesting, the old woman bowed to her fate. Folding her hands on her breast, the breast that had nourished her children, she lay down to die . . . Two days of tranquil sunshine, two nights of spangled beauty passed before her eyes. With the third night came "a windless cloud" shedding its millions and millions of snowflakes that wrapped her round and "covered her deep and silent". In the dawn and all through the day

> Up from the life below
> Rose a column of breath
> Through a tiny cleft in the snow,
> Fragile, delicately drawn.

But when God gathered the light of day to Himself there fell "a silence deeper than silence". The thin breath ceased to waver in the clear air. True rest was the old woman's at last. The suggestion at the close that God's love reached down and enfolded the Forsaken relieves an impression otherwise intolerably cruel and desolate.

III

In a most unusual way, Frances Cornford[1] interprets the Nurse. A little child has just died. While the mother lies "weeping tear on tear", oblivious of all but her own grief, the listening ear of the nurse fancies a child's ravaging cry on the winds of the night. It seems to her the weeping of the child who, on this first so different night, misses terribly and unreasoningly

> those only hands
> That understood to make it safe, usual, warm.

The baby cry pierces her heart. It has been her wont to hush it. She seeks the grown spirits of that other world and implores them to give her the child for just one night. They lay the tiny baby spirit at her side. Warmed and hushed, it quiets into sleep. Contented, then, the old nurse sleeps. When the morning reveals "the little spirit gone", she is not troubled for she believes that now all its fear is allayed. New toys are winning its heart in a "new world's light". Her little one happy, she has no more cause to grieve.

Another—quite different—portrait of the Nurse is done by Walter de la Mare, Juliet's Nurse.[2] The sketch tallies with our own impression of Shakespeare's wily old woman whose high tones floated over the radio, "like a ram's sweet bell" during a recent drama hour. The poet sees her

> One gloomy, vast, glossy, and wise, and sly.

Her gossipy tongue keeps pace with her prying mind and her "babied hands" flutter to the rhythm of her words.

> There's not a name but calls a tale to mind.

---

[1] The Old Nurse: "Twentieth Century Poetry." Ed. John Drinkwater, Canby, and W. R. Benet. Cambridge, Mass., Houghton, Mifflin, 1929.

[2] "Collected Poems 1901–1918." Walter de la Mare: Vol. 1. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

These tales all have origin or dénouement in the mid-wife's duty. As the stories shade, her blue eyes twinkle craftily or show their whites to "paint disaster". Gold she loves, beauty, too, and finery. Through this assemblage of cunning and skill peters a pale streak of religion, relic of her long-gone childhood.

Obviously Old Susan[3] belongs to the Nurse Group. Too, she might be considered among the night-reading old women. The mild eyes that peer through large glasses, the "stern and wrinkled face" under a crown of silver hair induce one to think she might take righteous joy in reading her Bible. Not Susan! She is an exception that proves no rule. The romantic old soul stints herself of well-earned rest to wander by night in the shadowy land of Romance. Past cock-crow, she turns on her restless charge with

> "You!—I thought You was in bed!"—
> Only to tilt her book again,
> And rooted in Romance remain.

Some of us have surely met the like of Henley's old Staff-Nurse.[4] While in hospital, he studied the sturdy lady and drew her portrait. There are those of us who can recognize another Nurse in

> The depth and malice of her sly grey eyes;
> The broad Scots tongue that flatters, scolds, defies;
> The thick Scots wit that fells you like a mace.

Broadly interpreting Scots as Gaelic, you have her.

> Much is she worth . . . . . .
> Patients and students hold her very dear.
> The doctors love her, tease her, use her skill.
> They say "the Chief" himself is half-afraid of her.

You know her. She is as alive today as she was two generations ago in the old Edinburgh Infirmary. And she is quite close to you.

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[3] "Collected Poems 1901–1918." Walter de la Mare: Vol. 1. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

[4] Staff-Nurse: Old Style. William Henley. "Poems." New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.

IV

In the fall of 1930, The New Republic presented two groups of poems by William Butler Yeats. Age—as well as love and life—is felt in the poetry of both groups.[1] [2] Subtly in one, as when dread follows the longing of love and tears the hearts of the lovers; frankly, in the other, when one of those pathetic old women of the Irish roads who must go mad if they live long enough, dwells on bright moments in her wild, free youth. In this group, A Song for Music is prelude to three poems that center about a half-crazed old tinker woman whom Yeats has named Cracked Mary. All four poems have refrains which give them something of the quaint old air of English balladry. A man

Who leans upon a stick

sings the Song. Leaning upon a stick, it would seem, gives certain privileges, among them that of telling painful truths to women "whose dancing days are gone". The singer himself is immune from Time's unkindly touch: witness the galloping triumph of the refrain

I carry the sun in a golden cup
The moon in a silver bag.

Cracked Mary and the Dancers is the old woman's reaction to an ivory image of a pair of dancers caught in a death grip. She remembers the time when she cared "not a thraneen" what ill might chance so that her young limbs whirled in rhythmic ecstasy.

Love is like a lion's tooth

is the telling refrain in this poem.

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[1] October 22, 1930. "Seven Poems."
[2] November 12, 1930. "Four Poems."

Cracked Mary and the Bishop shows Mary venting her spleen on an ecclesiastic. Years ago, the Bishop, then not "so much as parish priest"—old Mary sniffs contemptuously—had banned her lover because they had lived together unwed. The Bishop is made to suffer woefully in appearance by the side of her stalwart Jack the Journeyman who stood straight as "a birch tree", while the Bishop for all his episcopal dignity cannot

hide in holy black
The heron's hunch upon his back.

The refrains carry the taunt of the woman's bitterness:

The solid man and the coxcomb

seems to indicate the love and the hate that rattle through the poor cracked brain. In the other refrain there is a touch of the Yeats' shadowiness:

All find safety in the tomb.

The last poem is Cracked Mary Reproved. One may surmise that she is reproved for not believing that the wrath of heaven broke in thunder and lightning to blast the oak that sheltered her and her lover. Again, the second stanza seems to indicate that the heavens are rent and the waters of the deep rock in tumult to work the creation of a single, delicate shell. Their concern is not at all with the punishment of

A roaring, ranting journeyman

with whom, and she were wise, her heart would have as little concern.

The Madwoman of Punnet's Town[3] is a gay creature. Fascinated we watch as

[3] L. A. G. Strong: "Poetry of Our Times." Ed. Sharon Brown. Chicago, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1928.

Aswell within her billowed skirts
Like a great ship with sails unfurled.
The Madwoman goes gallantly
Upon the ridges of the world.

Airily unconcerned by wind or weather,

With eagle nose and wisps of gray
She strides upon the westward hills,

now swinging her umbrella in sociable response to "the waving mills", now chatting and chuckling with

The singing children of her brain.

A quiet contrast is old Betty Riddle[4] who sits and stares all day at her market stall, behind pyramids of mellow fruit that she sells at a "ha'p'worth" to hungry little boys. Betty, too, has an umbrella, but still as herself is the "patched blue umbrella slung over her chair". Worth more than a penny must be

the thought that is burning that blue and intense
Past—piercing steely eye.

But who thinks to offer it? Certainly not the laughing lads who care little what thought consumes a

Crazy old wife who sells
Greenjacks and jargonels—
Having buried three husbands in all in her time.

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[4] "Collected Poems 1905–1925." Wilfrid Gibson: London, Macmillan & Company, 1929.

V

Two old ladies are seated, one in a sheltered garden spot,[1] the other in some nook habitually hers.[2] One appears a woman who has picked her way rather daintily through life, avoiding its ruggedness; the other is one who has known the salt tears of things. The first lady is aloof and strange. A carven figure she might be,

> Cold and still
> as ivory,

were it not for the fingers that nervously ply the needle in and out some piece of sewing. A vagrant breeze has blown a chestnut blossom on her dress, but of breeze and blossom she is unaware. "Only a sculptor's cleverness", one might think—says the poet —this gentle touch of spring on winter's brown remoteness.

The lady in the nook is John Bunker's creation. Her calm repose is without movement of any kind. Still she suggests no carven image. Warm and human she is, albeit wise with

> the sober wisdom of the years.

Gazing at the folded hands, the dim, unquestioning eyes, the air of quiet tolerance, one thinks of Whistler and his mother. The suggestion that

> grief itself hath found its natural ending

recalls old Maurya[3] when she sprinkles Holy Water over Bartley's dead body, saying: "It's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and a great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain."

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[1] "Poems." Iris Tree: Lodon, John Lane, 1919.
[2] The Old Woman: "The Catholic Anthology." Ed. Thomas Walsh. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1927.
[3] "Riders to the Sea." John Millington Synge.

Another of my garden ladies who sit and sew is Walter de la Mare's bright brown-eyed Widow in Her Weeds.[4] She is not a weeping widow, though sometimes she sighs. We look for something unusual from the whimsical poet and find it in the kind of weeds peculiar to this widow. Instead of the accustomed depressing black drapes, the little widow moves about in

> Teazle and tansy, meadowsweet,
> Campion, toadflax, and rough hawksbit;
> Brown bee orchis, and Peals of Bells;
> Clover, burnet, and thyme she smells;
> . . . . . .
> And all she has is all she needs—
> A poor old Widow in her weeds.

Neighbour to the widow and gardened by lindens, is Mrs. Macqueen of the Lollie Shop.[5] Mrs. Macqueen is a woman of very regular life.

> At six she rises;
> At nine you see
> Her candles shine out
> In the linden tree.

The first two stanzas of the poem rustle with bright routine. The remaining three, closing on the

> long drawn S—s—sh!
> In the linden tree

are like a slumber song, lulling the old woman to rest.

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[4] "Collected Poems 1901–1918." Walter de la Mare: Vol. 1. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

[5] "Collected Poems 1901–1918." Walter de la Mare: Vol. 1. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

VI

In Almswomen,[1] Edmund Blunden presents a tender picture of the friendship of old age. Two dear little old ladies, long past seventy, live together in a bit of a house at the village end. They are so poor that all their little things are in common, yet a warm coziness permeates the tiny place, outside and in. In the fair summer days, when they can live out-of-doors in the little garden, the old ladies are bright and alive as their "linnet tinkling in his cage". In wintry weather, when storms pelt at the windows, they pile coal on the little fire

> that flings a freakish light
> On pictured kings and queens grotesquely bright,
> Platters and pitchers, faded calendars,
> And graceful hour-glass trim with lavenders.

Sometimes, when the "deep bay" of the church clock tells them the hour, they cling, and kiss, and cry, thinking of Death, praying that it may not come to divide them but that—the linnet with them—they may all go together from

> their treasured room
> Some bell-like evening when the may's in bloom.

In harsh contrast to those two friendly old ladies is another pair[2] who show the world how hard is the unforgiving Scot.

Two sisters had quarreled one night, and from that time, twenty years back, they had lived separate lives in unrelenting silence

> On either side a line chalked on the floor

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[1] Almswomen: "The Waggoner and Other Poems." London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1920.

[2] The Edinburgh Sisters: "The Golden Room and Other Poems." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.

of their shared room. Here, "in living graves of silence", the poet says, they forestalled

> The everlasting quiet of the tomb!

One might stir a new quarrel with the idea underlying the lines

> Not long enough for them, eternity
> And mortal man's inexorable doom.

But it would spoil the poet's figure and break that picturesque silence.

Still in this mood of silence, we come upon

> Sarah, mute as her own threshold stone.[3]

Sarah is mute perforce. She would like to talk, to shake loose the thing that

> all day long keeps turning in her head
> Like a trapped mouse.

But she lives alone in an "old outby cottage" where never a soul comes near. The Sunday morning hymn at church is her saving outlet. Week in, week out,

> In the back pew beneath the gallery

she

> Lets herself go in singing to the Lord.

The idea of the Sunday outbursts enclosing her silent week is expressed in the form of the poem, a sonnet of seven rhyming couplets set between a broken stanza of the Sunday morning hymn. This bit of technique intensifies the wave effect of the sonnet.

[3] Sarah: "The Golden Room and Other Poems." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.

One feels that Arthur Symons' own experience of life makes background for some of the old women whom he watches as they go

> Creeping with little satchels down the street.[4]

One perchance, is "a dancer of old carnivals" in whom memory stirs "the measure of past waltzes", lights again the candles at dusk, and warms and sweetens the air with patchouli. Another is, perhaps, a singer whose voice still holds

> here and there a note
> Of unspoilt crystal.

Miserable and wretched they are now, utterly forgotten by men who paid court to them in the blaze of their beauty. A sordid, painful sight. Withered flesh without a glimpse of soul, the ruin of the accumulated years dragged to the glare and lashed with biting cynicism:

> This is the end
> Of much fair flesh; it is for this you tend
> Your delicate bodies many careful years,
> To be this thing of laughter and of tears,
> To be this living judgment of the dead,
> An old gray woman with a shaking head.

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[4] The Old Women. "Poems" Vol. II. Arthur Symons. New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927.

VII

In a poem called The Ice,[1] one is sharply aware of an overtone. An old woman is enjoying a day's outing from the workhouse ward:

> With prim black bonnet and neat paisley shawl,
> Among the other children by the stall

she stands

> And with grave relish eats a penny ice.

The jeering laughter of young men frets her not,

> For, while their insolent youth must soon
> grow old,
> She, who's been old, is now a child again.

Betty Perrin[2] is included in Louis Untermeyer's latest anthology of Modern British Poetry.

> Up the pound path
> Long o' Lag Lane,
> Lives an old woman
> As never saw the rain,
> Never saw the sea,
> Nor the sun upon the earth;
> Poor Betty Perrin,
> Blind from her birth!

Betty's lack of mental as well as physical vision is probably the "new dimension" which Louis Untermeyer says the writer, Mr. A. E. Coppard, used to lift her out of a type common enough. It happens that of the nine "pretty maidies", her

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[1] "Collected Poems 1905–1925." Wilfrid Gibson: London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.
[2] "Modern British Poetry." New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1930.

sisters, the two saucy ones who "went on the town" and suffered an early death were humane sinners who kept Betty in "beer and skittles" and otherwise cared for her. The seven "decent ladies", always a source of "pious pride" to Betty, then

> Put her on the parish
> For they were truly wedded
> And she was hard to nourish.
> .....
> Poor Betty Perrin,
> Blind forevermore!

Alone[3] gives concrete image to an idea abstractly treated in Age.[4] The "ugly old crone" symbolizing Age in the latter poem becomes a flesh-and-blood old woman living in a little house with only a mouse and cricket for company. Both poems swing back and forth from age to youth in pitiful and depressing contrast.

Beaumont's Close,[5] the rather attractive name of an almshouse, is the title of a poem containing portraits of thirteen old women who dwell there. One describes the other and in doing so turns a different light upon herself.

Sharp-tongued Sally Simpson betrays an old jealous grudge against Betty Bodger, still attractive to the men, still dancing—though covertly—

> Red roses in her bosom and her hair!

Sally had warned Betty's lad before they wed, but he paid no heed. Now, at ninety-five he was dead, whereas "if he'd taken a friendly hint", he might still be alive!

Gullible Betty thinks Sally such a kind one, always "thinking of pleasant things to say". She wonders why Sally never wed

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[3, 4] "Collected Poems 1901–1918." Walter de la Mare. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1920.

[5] "The Golden Room and Other Poems." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.

and recalls the "sweet things" Sally used to say of her to her own lad.

Abigail Smith, prim and proper, forever busy at cleaning, religiously mindful of no one's business but her own, cannot but be annoyed at Sally's endless clacking and Betty's silly fooling with flowers instead of brooming her room. One glance from her baleful eye puts a dead stop to Betty's frivolity. Abigail tells how she did it:

> I never spoke a word—just gave one look,
> And left the Scarlet Woman to her shame;
> And came back to my room to read the Book
> Where such-like sluts go by their proper name.

Nell Dinning makes a few satirical comments on the purpose of "the old gent" whose bequest had built Beaumont Close

> "for thirteen aged females
> Of good report and sober conversation"!
> . . . . . .
> "Of good report"! Well, we keep on reporting,
> Till no one's left a shred of reputation:
> And as for "sober conversation", bless him!
> What did he mean by sober conversation?

Mary Maughan washing the steps, falls into a kind of dream about a son who sailed away "nigh fifty years ago". She clings to the thought of his return, for it's then she won't be stopping long at Beaumont Close. As she tells us:

> If I ken Reuben, he could never 'bide
> His mother's living upon charity;
> But, since the *Ellen* went out with the tide
> The time has gone by slow and drearily . . .

Molly Mandell is the philosopher of the group. What if these old women do "grutch and grumble"? That's only a sign of life, for they're not yet "dumb corpses". Well off they are, still to be living when most are dead at their age. And if life's hard, moving

about in a "snug, dry almshouse" is surely preferable to lying still "in the cold churchyard . . . in a leaky grave" and the weather "drooky".

Molly's churchyard talk stirs Nannie Lamb to her muttering again:

> That someone else should strake me, when
> I've straked
> So many in my time!

This is the thought that obsesses her as she lies wakeful in the night. Some one else, even

> yon stuck-up village nurse
> With her new-fangled ways

will fumble her corpse. Bitter to Nannie is the thought that she who had laid out

> As lovely corpses as you'd wish to see

can't have a chance at laying herself out and she the corpse.

Eliza Dobson carefully explains that though she had "little thought to live on charity", she won't complain if it's the Lord's way to chasten her. What really hurts her is that she and other decent folk must mix with "trollops." There's one she could name,—and she waits for the day that one will be carried "feet-first" up Church Lane. Meanwhile, she won't complain. God's will be done!

Grateful Bella Burgin thanks her stars for so "snug a crib". Bedridden, she's still "couth and cosy", though she daren't let her thoughts go above a whisper for fear she'd shock "the holy lot" around her.

Proud Matilda Turnbull keeps herself to herself as the Turnbulls have ever done. There's none there quite her kind though Madaline Beaumont, great-great-grand-daughter to the founder is her neighbor. Madaline isn't proud. She is thoughtful. As she muses on the change of family fortune, her final thought is one of blessing on the "warm-hearted charity" that gives her ultimate shelter.

Alice Lishman mourns her husband Jim who has gone a long journey without her, so unlike the Jim she knew, "who took no trips alone" lest she should fret. They told her a bull had gored him. In any case, she's now alone and in the almshouse. He won't like that when he returns, but what else could she do? And there'll be Betty's roses. He was a great one for roses, and if she knows him, "he'll ken a good rose still."

Martha Brownlow, last of the group, reflects on the gossiping ways of these women. True enough, they talk and talk, and not always is it "sober conversation". But then, she asks:

> what else is there to do
> For thirteen old wives, waiting for their coffins?

Happily she recalls that Betty Bodger tends her roses. This reference occurs with fair frequency throughout the entire poem so that Betty's roses scatter their sweetness over the poignancy of Beaumont Close.

VIII

Little Miss Thompson[1] is not, strictly speaking, an old woman, but she is a deliciously dear near-old woman. Perhaps, for all her lively movements as she makes ready for a thrilling day in town, I might have thought her old, thrills and all. What really decided me was the slippers. When I saw her yield to the hard-fought temptation of an extremely improper—not to say useless—pair of scarlet plush slippers, I knew she was not absolutely old. She is not quite comfortable herself in this unbecoming extravagance. We are told:

> Miss Thompson feels a conscious blush
> Suffuse her face, as though her thought
> Had ventured further than it ought.
> But oh, that color's rapturous singing
> And the answer in her lone heart ringing!

To further allurements of worldliness and vanity at the milliner's she is immune. At the fishmonger's she makes a purchase, conscience-clear. Two kippers, sixpence the pair, are laid in her basket. Wrapped in newspaper, they lie face to face in democratic nearness to those tingling scarlet slippers . . . Lightly, she steps along to the grocer's, then to Mr. Wren, the chemist, for she must procure a bottle against the rheumatism and some peppermints "in case of wind".

> Still on from shop to shop she goes
> With sharp bird's-eye, inquiring nose,
> Prying and peering, entering some,
> Oblivious of the thought of home . . .
> . . . . . .
> The clock struck six. . . . . .
> . . . . . .

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[1] Miss Thompson Goes Shopping. Martin Armstrong. "Poetry of Our Times." Edited by Sharon Brown, Chicago, Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1928.

Then as she climbed the misty downs
The lamps were lighted in the distant town's
Small streets. She saw them star by star
Multiplying from afar.....
.....
And all that soul-uplifting stir
Step by step fell back from her,
The glory gone, the blossoming
Shriveled, and she, a small frail thing,
Carrying her laden basket.
.....
But loudly, sweetly, sang the slippers
In the basket with the kippers;
And loud and sweet the answering thrills
From her lone heart on the hills.

The color of scarlet flashes through another poem, but not in the dazzling and oh, so lovely and romantic way by which it lured little Miss Thompson. In "the Scarlet Hat"[2] we have the picture of a little woman huddled against the river-wall in the grey winter dawn—dead. Unlike Miss Thompson, she has gone all the way of life and found the end more than lonely. Perched like a tropic bird on her grizzled hair is a gay red hat. How she clung to it to the last! Symbol it was of her youth and

"The scarlet pride of her girlish heart",

—a tangible something—that kept her chilling heart, to the last beat, in touch with the time

when on her golden head
She'd set it, laughing with the love of life—
Nor ever guessed that life and love should part.

In The Fishwife,[3] also, Wilfrid Gibson looks through drab,

[2] "The Golden Room and Other Poem." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.
[3] The Fishwife: "The Golden Room and Other Poems." Wilfrid Gibson. London, Macmillan and Company, 1928.

painful age to the youth that went before. In a stanza of eight lines he makes us shiver on the "slimedank" street and feel the "clammy and slithery soles" as they slip through the "purple chilblained hands" of the fishwife,

> A squat broad bundle, fat and old,
> With body and mind benumbed with the cold.

In the next eight lines the depressing scene is blotted out and we see "a sprig of a lass" with a glint in her eye, standing on the sea's edge. She smiles as the boats come in, her body leaning "against the gale", her hair tossing in the windy dawn.

The closing couplet unites present and past, age and youth:

> And I know that bundle of clothes holds yet
> The heart of a girl who cannot forget.

IX

Fifty winters do not of necessity age a woman, but

> A hard north-easter fifty winters long
> Has bronzed and shrivelled sere

the woman of Fisherrowe.[1] Her vast foot, her bowed legs "spare and strong" are needed to sustain "her great creel forehead-slung" from which she vends her wares along the street,

> The spirit of traffic watchful in her eye.

With her grit goes cleanliness,—the outward sign, "a mutch without a speck" that tops her array of quaint garments assembled, coat on coat, against the biting winter air.

In four lines, Mr. L. A. G. Strong gives pithines and good characterization:

> In this Theatre they has plays
> On us, and high-up people comes
> And pays to see things playin' here
> They'd run like hell from in the slums.[2]

It is old Mary Doul[3] we seem to overhear talking to Martin as they jog the road in a rare companionable humor during the pathetic interim of restored sight. Jerking a dirty thumb in the direction of the theatre, she would be telling Martin of the queer things going on inside, and queerer still, that

> high-up people comes
> And pays to see.

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[1] In Fisherrowe:" "Poems." William Ernest Henley. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.
[2] An Old Woman Outside the Abbey Theatre: "Dublin Days." New York, Boni and Liveright, 1923.
[3] "The Well of the Saints:" John Millington Synge.

Puzzlement, scorn, amusement, ridicule ring in the tones that tell of those who come to see a stage set-up of what—none knows better than she—

> They'd run like hell from

as an actual contact.

Nell the Rambler[4] gets her name from the fact that she can ramble on with

> tales and rhymes and sayings
> With a child's light in her worn eyes, and laughter
> To all her words.

Like the Mountain Thrush that hops from spot to spot seeking a bright, warm place, Nell went from hearth to hearth, weaving her fancies and so entrancing her listeners that they

> ate potatoes out of the ash, and thought them
> Like golden apples out of Tibrobane.
> . . . . . .
> She did not think
> Bread of dependence bitter; three went with her—
> Hunger, Sorrow, Loneliness, and they
> Had crushed all that makes claims, though
> they'd not bent her
> Nor emptied her of trust.

Greatly denied, two gifts yet had God given her and these like the servant in the Scripture[5] who received two talents, she "used according to her ability" nor did not bury them: the power of weaving fancies and unhesitating trust in her fellow-creatures.

I think it likely that only an Irish poet could find two such resemblances as are found here. One is made in the attempt to define the kind of lore that was Nell's:

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[4] Reminiscence IX: "Dramatic Legends and Other Poems." Padraic Colum. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1922.

[5] St. Matthew: xxv. 14–31.

'Twas like a kingly robe, on which long rains
Have fallen and fallen, and parted
The finely woven web, and have washed away
The kingly colors, but have left some threads
Still golden, and some feathers still as shining
As the Kingfisher's.

The other occurs in the outline of the tale of Earl Gerald. This great Earl, created out of Nell's bright web of myth, rode abroad on a horse shod with heavy silver. So many roads had he to ride, that the silver shoes wore thin,

As thin as the cat's ears before the fire,
Upraised in such content before the fire,
And making little lanterns in the firelight.

Another old woman of the roads is Bessie Bobtail.[6] Bessie with small, grim face

Screwed and wrinkled tight
Just like a nut,

went stumping along the road, shaking her head from right to left, muttering, the poet says, "a thing was desperate". Through the three stanzas of the poem, we follow him as he followed her,—curious, half-abashed, lest we hear the dreadful, desperate word. With characteristic elf-like spring, the poet faces us at the last (or so we fancy) to make known the desperate, muttered word at last overheard. His own head sways to the singing rhythm:

O God He knows! And, God He knows!
And, surely God Almighty knows!

Old Meg's partner of the roads must have been a rare courteous old man.[7] Well does he deserve to be mourned by the old woman

[6] "Collected Poems." James Stephens. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1928.
[7] Old Meg: "Collected Poems 1905–1925." Wilfrid Gibson. London, The Macmillan Company, 1929.

who now goes "travelling the roads alone". Cherries may hang "handy and ripe", but there's no Billy Boy to reach out a hand and pluck them for her; no man now to find her "a soft mossy stone"; no man to light her pipe. Lonely old Meg!

The Grove near St. John o' God's was a fitting place for beggars to carry on their mode of livelihood.[8] To old Molly[9] it seemed a good place commercially. People's hearts, as they went home from Mass, were likely to be softened. And soft they must be to heed a cry from such as she—

> A poor old dirty woman,—
> Her skirt all torn to flitters, and rags itself
> her shawl:
> A quare old silly woman, her boots let in the
> rain,
> And sorra' stocking to her feet, you'd see her
> limp with pain,
> Letting a sigh at every step an' clutchin' at
> the wall.

One day, as she begged, there passed along a stranger dressed in black. Molly began her accustomed whine. The stranger's air of sympathy lured her to reminiscence. Her cracked voice took on a gay note as she recalled the time when the lads were "all leppin' up" to look at her,

> A fine young figyure of a girl with hair like
> shiny gold.

But the gay note minored into a whine again as she told of the troublous times that followed, and how she was now without a penny and her bed like to be a stone.

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[8] The Patron Saint of this Church, who lived in the first half of the 16th century, spent the latter part of his life supporting the homeless poor by his own begging.

[9] The Doctor: "Hallowe'en and Other Poems." Winifred Letts. London, John Murray, 1916.

Maybe the stranger pitied her, so thin she
was and shakin',
A poor old bag of bones itself inside her
ragged shawl.
He caught her hand, she clutched at him . . .

So, in the arms of Death—the black-clad stranger—closed the weary, sordid life. A breeze, warm with spring, stirred the rags of shawl against her pale, dead face. A robin, callous or unaware, picked greedily at the crusts of bread still lying on her knees.

I have in mind three little houses. Two set on a hillside would be white, with many colored flowers growing by the wall. In one[10] of these, as night would come on, the man and woman of the house would sit in comradely way by the side of the hearth. In the other,[11] a friendly lady would light the candles on her table, brew the tea, and tell strange stories to any welcomed guest. Both of these are wished-for houses,—bright, pretty houses, sweet with companionship. The women who are wishing for them have always known the comfort of houses, but they have missed a certain joy of companionship. There is the third house.[12]

The woman who is wishful of it is a poor old woman of the roads,—lonely, houseless roads where "the crying wind and the lonesome hush" abide. She is longing for a little house where she may live her lone, where she may have the homey things she has often gazed at in other people's houses,—

a clock with weights and chains
And penudlum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown!

There all day long she could be busy with sweeping and cleaning.

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[10] The Wish: "Hallowe'en and Other Poems." Winifred Letts, London, John Murray, 1916.
[11] A Dedication: "More Songs from Leinster." Winifred Letts. London, John Murray, 1926.
[12] An Old Woman of the Roads. "Wild Earth and Other Poems." Padraic Colum. New York, The Macmillan Company.

At night she could sit by the fire, comfortingly sure of a bed. Company enough would be "the ticking clock and the shining delph". Night and day she is praying God for this little house that will ease the great ache that has come to her heart for a little shelter

> Out of the wind's and the rain's way.

Though Padriac Colum's old woman has lost the will for the roads, John Drinkwater's Old Woman in May[13] still travels "with a will". The lovely season doubtless contributes to the brave vigor with which she trudges the miles

> To Dumbleton and back
> And round by Cotsall Hill,

peddling her little wares. Though she goes her way—

> A Jill without a Jack—

she bears no grudge to the young folk who are Maying. Why should she? Can she not hear

> the call
> Of cattle on the hillside
> And watch the blossoms' fall
> In a Churchyard where maybe
> I'll meet him after all.

Other worldliness hovers over a picture given by Miss Tree.[14] An old woman sits upright in bed, her white hair blowing in wisps about her head, her Bible lying open on her knees. Gropingly, her mind reaches out for meaning in the words "her

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[13] "Cromwell and Other Poems." London, David Nutt, 1913.
[14] The Old Woman and the Wind: "The Traveller and Other Poems." Iris Tree. New York, Boni & Liveright, 1927.

slow finger points". She is companioned only by the ticking clock, a sleepy cat, and the weird night wind that rattles the windows, stirs the curtains, and sends the flame sideways in the guttering candle. Steadily the clock ticks towards the hour. Slowly the old woman's pulse lags, grows faint, flickers out. To her feeble cry: "Norah . . . Norah", only the wind makes reply. It listens . . . waits . . . dies down . . . There is a great stillness.

The night, the wind, the loneliness of the upsitting white-haired old woman whose soul passes while her tired mind still seeks refuge in the Holy Book,—all these in Miss Tree's picture are awe-compelling. They enfold one in the mystery of Death. But it is a pitifully drab scene that Horace Shipp creates in Old Woman Gets Out of Bed.[15] He means it to be drab,—from the title to the last line that leaves the grey body an untidy heap on the floor. The picture is one of frustration.

Some idea tormenting the old creature's mind makes her want to get out of bed. The child, left to watch by the bed-side, is unable to enforce the Nurse's injunction—"more awful than any delivered on Sinai"—that granny lie quiet. With the last "thin twitch" of her body, the old woman is out of bed, but dead on the floor. The line

> Life should go out to meet Death with a
> trumpet's scarlet blowing

seems preposterously out of place here, indeed mere bombast.

Kate Cowl[16] is a bed-ridden old woman, lively and loquacious, plain and strong as her name. Her ready tongue presents her own portrait. She has her Bible at hand, and when a kindly neighbor stops in to do a hand's turn, she gets her orders:

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[15] "Old Woman Gets Out of Bed." Horace Shipp. *Literary Digest*, July 5, 1930.

[16] Kate Cowl: "Manx Melodies." Josephine Kermode. London, John Long, 1922.

Grip me savadge, Miss Geargie,
  An' heis me up in bed,
An' you can be radin' them texes
  The while I reddy me head.

Miss Geargie, we trust, is "plentiful in pins" for the torn laps round Kate's head. The "texes", however, are not for Miss Geargie. She must listen while Kate tells how she was

  dhramin' a dhrame in the night
When the win's took rest from their noisin'
  An' the say was middlin' quite.

For some while back it has been on old Kate's mind that it is time she "was took". In some measure, this may account for the dream in which the Lord Himself "stud beside the bed" and in her own quaint tongue called to her:

Come urrov there, Kate Cowl,—
  An' go you up on high,
For such as you that's oul' and blind
  There's mansions in the sky.

And up they went, her Lord and she, singing: "Glo . . . ry, Glo . . . ry", above the roaring of the waves. But suddenly—"the Light went out" and old Kate Cowl was there alone in her bed in the cold, dark room. Yet something of the glory of that dream remains and mixes through her earthly needs in a rather pathetic, rather humorous way. As Miss Geargie leaves the room, Kate bids her "good everin'", adding:

  An' plaze pull to the door.

An' Glo-ry for ever Glo-ry
  An' a Light for the blind to see—
An' a lil bit of pudden, Miss Geargie,
  If Mayry will spare it for me.

Oul' Jane[17] tells her own life story with pathetic garrulity reinforced by rugged idiom. Her grit commands respect. It has sustained her through things harder, more bitter than poverty, and one feels it will see her through to the end. The memory of the little boy, long since dead, offsets the later memory of the grown-ups who deserted her. As she sits at night in her empty room, without light, without fire, "thinkin' long", among the dark shadows of her mind there bobs up ever and again a "wee red head", and she can hear "the chatterin' tongue of him"—

> wee Jim who never left me—the saft wee thing,
> Wi' ginger hair an' blue mischeevious eyes.

Dignity of diction and reverence of treatment mark an objective study of the same theme in An Old Woman.[18] The treatment suggests Joseph Campbell's Old Woman, without however, its classic restraint and its afterglow of rich fulfillment. Lines such as

> Stript of her beauty as a winter tree,
> Worn as a rock is worn by a buffeting sea—

hurt in their severe denuding of all that suggests life's fulfillment. That she herself is not worn to such cold symbolism is evident in the personal regard she stirs in the poet:

> Still in her ruin she abides for me
> Symbol of woman. The glory of her race
> Shines all about her. She is of heavenly kin,
> And her unlitten room a holy place.

Arthur Symons is revealed a bit unusually in a little poem called In Saint Jacques.[19] Standing in the dim light of this chapel he discerns, amid the shadows,

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[17] "Selected Poems." Richard Rowley. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1931.
[18] Ibid.
[19] "Poems." Vol. II. Arthur Symons. New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927.

A little heap before a waxen Saint.

The "little heap" is a woman "grown old with sorrow". She is bowed in prayer. Reverence and awe come upon him as he looks. It is borne in upon him that

Heaven above heaven, the starry hosts
are there.

Her need has been great, but it is met:

She is alone; yet is it not enough
To be alone with God as she is here?

The poem might have ended on this note of spiritual exaltation, but it turns subjective. The poet envies the woman the rapture of her prayer. He, too, has a need. He has believed in Love and found Love untrue. He would kneel by her side and pray Love true. Poor substitute for prayer,—this passionate importunity in selfish quest. Naturally, something holds him back, —something more than lack of faith to see beyond "the wax and paint".

The religious orders of the Catholic Church fall into two general classifications. In one of these great classes, are the nuns who lead a contemplative life of prayer; in the other, are those who lead what is called the active life, in which prayer mingles with action for the good of others. The Old Nun[20] is a contemplative whose dwelling is the heights of silent prayer. Sister Mary Gregory[21] is a nun of an active order, whose zealous care for others' souls bears in to color all her whispered prayers to God. The Old Nun is learned

in the deep skies'
Profundities—in simple hope
and candid love.

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[20] Theodore Maynard. *Commonweal* reprinted in *The Literary Digest*, October 24, 1925.

[21] "More Songs from Leinster." Winifred Letts. London, John Murray, 1926.

Daily as she kneels on her prie-dieu before the Altar

> in the dim
> Light of the winter dawns,

her soul moves out in ecstasy beyond "the world's rim" to mystic union with her God. All her life moves in one accord toward the final happy moment that shall find her "the youngest of the dead".

"Apple-faced" old Sister Mary Gregory prays, too, though the atmosphere is less rare. Her knees,

> Calloused and creaky at the joints
> With life-long pieties,

do not, somehow, suggest a prie-dieu. She is greatly concerned about the myriad children of her spiritual union with her Lord. Faithfully she names them to Him, one by one. It is quite natural to fancy her—the days of this life done—bustling about the Courts of Heaven, with freedom of the keys, engaged in making ready mansions for her brood to which she will conduct them with the old-time motherly care.

Mrs. Effingham's Swan Song[22] is the cry of a woman who feels the proud years of life slipping from her,—life loved and lived to the utmost,—and selfishly. The beauty that has drawn homage has spent itself, and she must now retire with those others she has seen grow old with graciousness. One doubts that she will fit into that calm, sustaining group, she that believes

> Who plays the rose must pay the rose's price
> And be a rose or nothing till it dies.

Belike here the thorns may remain and prick in malice on occasion. Her soul struggles in the anguish of transition, and her song is pitched now low, now high, as she accepts or bitterly

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22 "New Poems and Old." Muriel Stuart. Hartford, Conn., Mitchell, 1926.

opposes the common fate of human kind. One moment she solaces herself with the thought:

> I have eaten the fruit of Knowledge long enough,
> Been over-kissed, and over-praised, and over-won.

This caught-at easement is speedily crushed under a fury of resentment that seizes her, resentment against men whose lives are longer, fuller, who

> do not know
> What Age says to a woman.

This flare ends on a fiercely triumphant note:

> They could not smile into the eyes of that
> entombing hour,
> Who had bent all summer to their bow.

Her song grows low, then, faltering, and ends on a note of terror as she envisages the future:

> I was not always kind when I was young
> To women who were old, for Youth is blind—
>
> One day I shall be stupid and rather slow,
> And easily cowed and troubled in my mind,
> And tremulous, vaguely frightened, feeble and cold.
>
> I am growing old. . . . My God, how old, how old! . . .
> I dare not tell them, but one day they will know . . .
> I hope they will be kind.

In the introduction to Miss Stuart's little volume, Henry Savage writes: "In this poem is the soul of every woman whose greatest fear is for the loss of her outward beauty and sex lure." Willingly, we turn from the strident grief of Miss Effingham to meet one who goes, white head still erect, tired heart still courageous, her blessed eyes piercing the dark veil of Now,

glimpsing the radiant light of the Everlasting. Meet *The Old Woman* of Joseph Campbell.[23]

Austere beauty and rich suggestion characterize this brief poem. It reveals in the author a very passion for simplification. Its three pictures are each a symbol of

> woman
> With her travail done.

There is no attempt at physical portraiture. We are left finally with an impression in which the white flame of holiness and the crimson flame of beauty meet in a great stillness. We see

> a white candle
> In a holy place,

but what we feel is the in-dwelling of God in an aged woman's worn body. There flashes before us

> the spent radiance
> Of the winter sun,—

and we see the pale afterglow of her life when the fires of passion and beauty have gone down in a dying flame. We look upon still waters

> Under a ruined mill,

and the full years of her life rise up before us, the years when her brood still flocked to her with incessant need.

Here are Sacredness, Beauty, Accomplishment. I have read no equal tribute to woman.

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[23] "Irishry." Dublin and London, 1913.

These studies have been attractive to the writer because of her personal contacts with old and not-yet-old women whose philosophy of life and death touches to ennoble. Where the studies were in themselves unlovely, these real lives stood out in moving contrast. Where they were lovely, they were dear reminders of lives intimately known.

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